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SUBJECT: RESULTS OF NEW INTERVIEWS WITH CENTRAL HIGHLANDS VISAS-93 APPLICANTS

REF: HCMC 1045

1. (SBU) HCMC's Refugee Resettlement Section (RRS) continues to conduct VISAS-93 family reunification interviews for Central Highlands ethnic minority individuals. As in August and September, when 124 cases were interviewed (reftel), ConGen staff had unfettered access to nine more ethnic minority families in mid-November. In the latest round of interviews, five families came from Gia Lai, two from Kontum and two from Dak Lak provinces. This was the second trip to HCMC for each of these families; non-Vietnamese RRS staff conducted pre-screening interviews prior to this round of interviews with a United States Citizenship and Immigration Services Officer.

2. (SBU) Police harassment after their husbands' departure was a problem for about half the new batch of applicants. One was questioned on the money her husband sent her from the U.S., but ultimately always received the money in full. Three others, two from Gia Lai and one from Dak Lak, reported monthly questioning from the police about their husbands' whereabouts, but all stated that questioning had stopped by the beginning of 2005. Another applicant from Dak Lak reported that police accused her of collaboration with ethnic minority separatists. She was arrested for 23 days when she tried to flee to Cambodia in 2004. She was detained again for five days in 2005 for "attempting to leave." Police nonetheless authorized her to travel to HCMC twice for her VISAS-93 interviews, albeit with instructions not to discuss sensitive issues with ConGen staff. Four applicants reported that they were questioned briefly immediately after their husbands' departure. None of the applicants reported any physical harassment during police questioning or detention.

3. (SBU) Police treatment of the applicants mirrored the treatment of their husbands prior to their flight to Cambodia. Those applicants whose husbands reportedly fled to avoid police interest because of suspected participation in separatist groups or in anti-GVN demonstrations tended to receive greater police scrutiny or harassment. Those applicants who stated that their husbands had no problems with police prior to departure tended to have fewer or no problems with police after their husbands' flight.

4. (SBU) Applicants other than from Dak Lak province did not have problems getting documents needed for their VISAS-93 interview. One applicant from Dak Lak stated that bribes of around 20 USD were required; the other applicant from Dak Lak reported that she had to pay a fee of 1 USD for "expedited paperwork processing."

5. (SBU) The applicants from provinces other than Dak Lak also did not report religious freedom problems. The two applicants from Kontum reported that they could attend Catholic church and worship freely. The parish priest had to seek local authorization for large gatherings, such as Christmas mass, but the applicants were not aware of instances when approval was denied. The applicants from Gia Lai said there were no restrictions on their ability to attend village Protestant house churches and said police had never pressured them to renounce their faith. However, religious freedom conditions in Dak Lak were more restrictive. The applicant who was accused of ties to ethnic minority separatist groups said that she was pressured to renounce "Protestantism" immediately after her husband's departure. However, the second applicant from Dak Lak, who was not suspected of being an ethnic minority activist, said that police had never pressed her to renounce her faith. That said, authorities had banned religious gatherings and burned a house church "gathering point" in early 2004. More recently, villagers have been able to gather at house churches without restriction.

6. (SBU) Comment: The latest round of interviews supports our prior observations that conditions in the Central Highlands provinces are improving for ethnic minorities. While Dak Lak has not yet issued passports to any VISA-93 applicants, the fact that they continue to allow applicants to travel to HCMC for interviews is encouraging and might signal a softening in their approach. We plan to press Dak Lak provincial authorities on passport issuances for VISAS-93 beneficiaries during a planned early December visit to the Central Highlands. End Comment.

WINNICK